

# How does mid-day meal scheme shape the socialization value in rural India?

Dear Editor,

Mid-day meal scheme is being implemented in India since August 15, 1995, as a part of the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education. It was introduced in India with an objective to enhance enrollment, retention, and attendance and simultaneously improving nutritional levels among children initially in 2408 blocks in the country which later spread to other blocks as well. Central Assistance under the scheme includes the free supply of food grains of 100 g per child per school per day and subsidy for transportation of food grains up to a maximum of Rs. 50 per quintal. The scheme has been revised from time to time and revisions in the scheme during different times included new reforms and changes and advancements in the scheme.<sup>[1]</sup>

Besides promoting nutrition and primary education Mid-Day Meals (MDMs) have a great socialization value. By this certain level of erosion of caste prejudices and class inequality is expected as the children sit together and share a common meal.<sup>[2]</sup> However, sometimes some unintended consequences also happen in Indian communities and the MDM acts as a tool of reinforcement rather than erosion of prevailing social inequalities. In one of the studies, it was revealed that in Rajasthan Dalit children were asked to drink in their cupped hands while other children used common glasses. This is an awful instance of caste discrimination in the classroom, which defeats the socialization role of mid-day meals. On the other hand, studies reveal that children of all social backgrounds seem to be quite happy sitting together and sharing the common food. Parents were also believed to welcome the arrangement in most cases. Teachers confirmed that parents of higher castes rarely objected to their children sharing a meal with children of other castes. Similarly, very few parents from disadvantaged castes felt that their children had ever been victim of caste discrimination in the context of the mid-day meal program.<sup>[3]</sup> However, another research finding from Tamil Nadu reveals that a second standard student of a government primary school located in a locality of dominant caste was denied food and hounded out of the school when she tried to participate with the rest of the school in mid-day meal program. The obvious reason was that she was a Dalit and her classmates were from dominant caste. The findings of the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies from one of the surveys conducted in 531 villages

of five Indian states reveal the pattern of exclusion and discrimination in Government of India's mid-day meal scheme and public distribution system.<sup>[4]</sup> Similar instances were also seen in Mandya District of Karnataka where several villages in Mandya District have boycotted the program, protesting against the appointment of Dalit cooks.<sup>[5]</sup>

Any program has both positive and negative consequences when it is implemented in society. In the case of a government program, the philosophy behind it is to bring inclusiveness in the society. The government may not serve the entire population but has a bigger responsibility to accommodate the downtrodden population. This is how government programs function to bring equity and equality in the society by enforcing laws and policies for the overall development of the community. In MDM Scheme Government comes up with budgetary provision, necessary regulations, and monitoring mechanism. The issues raised by different researchers are of social nature and deeply entrenched in the social and cultural belief system. Discrimination on the basis of class, caste, religion, and creed is regularly reported in Indian society and sometimes also result in violent consequences. Schools are situated in the diverse society and have made an immense effort to minimize these evil practices. However, the practice of social discrimination in India goes back to more than 2000 years. MDM comes up with the philosophy of community dining among the school students which is a well-thought program with sufficient budgetary allocation and community support. The main aim is to provide nutritious meals and enhancing the learning process by reducing absenteeism. This is more or less achieved. However, the interaction of other sociocultural factors in a locality or region affects the sanctity of such program. Discriminations are often reported and very much linked with the MDM Program, which ultimately defame the program. The law enforcing agencies have to take into consideration of the community dynamics before rolling out of such programs. All the stakeholders including the families of students have to be consulted for the better implementation of such programs.

To tackle such issues in India a convergence among the district administration, community leaders, school boards, chief man of the caste, and civil society is highly desirable. Harmony could only be established by amicable discussion and understanding of the core issue by the community members. If required law enforcing agency could take steps for the unruly sections of the society. As the students are at receiving end and they are the future of the society their interest have to be safeguarded against any odds. It is always advisable to discuss such issues before rolling out of MDM program. This would provide an amicable solution for the agitated society in a government school. The teachers of the school need to reach out to the diverse community within their jurisdiction for the improvement of social values which

will help in removing the dogma of the society and effective functionality of the MDM.

Albeit these instances are sporadic in nature, however, a petite of such events, create an unjust society. Hence, special attention needs to be taken in instances where such discriminations are happening with the help of local intellectuals, civil societies, and other stakeholders. The functionality of the program in a society of children with malnutrition and low enrollment carries paramount value. The school always plays an important role in the socio-economic development of society. The aim of bringing social equality though MDM ought to be strengthened either by enforcement of law or with negotiation among different stakeholders.

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